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# THE TERRIBLE AND THE SUBLIME
# SOME NOTES ON SENECA'S POETICS

## The Sources of the Sublime – a Theoretical View

The most important ancient theorist of the sublime is, of course, Pseudo-Longinus, who wrote the famous treatise Περί ὕψους, which means *On the Sublime*. Although the author of the treatise never gives a definition of the sublime[1], it is also quite clear that he does not really need to do so[2].

As James Hill rightly points out, while ὕψος, i. e. the sublime, is *an abstract idea* and *cannot be directly defined*, we can nevertheless describe *its Gestalt* and *its archetypal figuration, as it were*[3]. There is, however, one very good, short but extremely adequate "description" of the sublime which wholly compensates for the lack of a definition, and whose author is Edmund Burke, the modern successor of Pseudo-Longinus. According to Burke, the essential factor which is responsible for the sublime is *a passion similar to terror* which is invoked by a "sublime" object:

*Having considered terror as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves, it easily follows* [...] *that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension, must be productive of* ***a passion similar to terror****, and consequently must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it*[4].

[1] J. J. Hill, *The Aesthetic Principles of the "Peri Hupsous"*, "Journal of the History of Ideas" Vol. 27, 1966, No. 2, pp. 265-266.

[2] '[...] nowhere does his work presuppose the necessity for explicit definition', *ibidem*, p. 266.

[3] *Ibidem*, *passim*.

[4] E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime*

The author of another "description" of the sublime, which is complementary to that of Burke, is Immanuel Kant: *we may look upon an object as fearful, and yet not be afraid of it, if, that is, our estimate takes the form of our simply picturing to ourselves the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile*[5].

The representations of great and terrible things in art, in this case in literature, fulfil that condition. The reader can fully experience the sublime by means of his imagination. Many modern authors have composed their works in accordance with these principles, among them Edgar Allan Poe[6] and M. R. James, who have treated feelings of terror and horror as the main sources of some particular pleasure for their readers.

A poet or a novelist owes that power solely to language, as it is nothing else but words that excite the reader's imagination and produce emotional reactions. And the critic who has drawn attention to this extraordinary power of language is once again Burke[7].

It is quite interesting that Burke's conception of powerful words was based on the particular historical context of the French Revolution[8], when words suddenly began to lose their "normal" meaning only to assume a new, artificial one[9]. Looking at Burke's aesthetic ideas from this point of view, we can realize how important his discovery was.

[...] *There are no tokens which can express all the circumstances of most passions as fully as words*[10] – concludes Burke. Words can therefore help a politician to spread propaganda in the same way they can help an artist to influence the passions of his audience[11].

According to Burke, the power of painting, for example, cannot even compare with that of language, as the former lacks all the possibilities

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*and Beautiful*, ed. D. Womersley, London 2004, p. 163.

[5] I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, transl. and indexes J. C. Meredith, Oxford 1978, p. 110.

[6] J. M. Garrison, *The Function of Terror in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe*, "American Quarterly", Vol. 18, 1966, No. 2, part 1, p. 146.

[7] E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[8] See G. Armstrong Kelly, *Conceptual Sources of the Terror*, "Eighteenth-Century Studies", Vol. 14, 1980, No. 1., p. 30.

[9] S. Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language. The French Revolution as a Linguistic Event*, "Eighteenth-Century Studies", Vol. 17, 1984, No. 3, p. 285; see also E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

[10] *Ibidem, passim.*

[11] See E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

which abound in the latter: *In painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words*[12].

Here he quotes Virgil's description of the death of Priam (*Aen.* 2, 502) just to illustrate how words affect the mind and how moving an image a good poet can construct with them. This fragment of the *Aeneid* is cruel enough to evoke terror (and thus the sublime), though it is still somewhat removed from Seneca's wildness and naturalism.

## The Senecan Sublime

### 1. Nature

*a. Sublime Sceneries*

As the son of a teacher of rhetoric, a philosopher, a poet and ultimately a politician, Seneca was perfectly conscious of the great power of the spoken and written word. He certainly realized how deeply and strongly language could influence people's minds and how it played on their passions, although he himself never wrote any treatise on the subject, unlike Longinus or Burke.

In his works he often expresses his opinions on the sublime in passing. A case in point is letter 41 of the *Epistulae morales*, to which Alessandro Schiesaro also draws attention[13]. The passage quoted below shows that Seneca's idea of the sublime was very similar to that of the eighteenth-century theorists, and in particular that of Burke and Schiller.

He speaks of nature as producing a strong commotion of the mind, a *religionis suspicio* which is very similar to Burke's *feeling similar to terror*:

*Si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli <densitate> ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numi-*

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 197.

[13] A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play. "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, p. 127.

*nis faciet. Si quis specus saxis penitus exesis montem suspenderit, non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxitatem excavatus, animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet.* (*Epist.*, 41, 3)

It is quite clear that in his prose Seneca remains a poet. He considers philosophical and moral issues (here – the existence of God), but it is his artistic imagination that actually steers his discourse. A rather similar depiction of scenery that is mysterious and at the same time terrifying can be found in *Thyestes*, in the famous description of the grove of Atreus:

*Arcana vetustum valle compescens nemus,*
*penetrale regni, nulla qua laetos solet*
*praebere ramos arbor aut ferro coli,*
*sed taxus et cupressus et nigra ilice*
*obscura nutat silva, quam supra eminens*
*despectat alte quercus et vincit nemus.*
[...]
*Fons stat sub umbra tristis et nigra piger*
*haeret palude; talis est dirae Stygis*
*deformis unda quae facit caelo fidem.*
[...]
*nox propria luco est, et superstitio inferum*
*in luce media regnat, hinc orantibus*
*responsa dantur certa, cum ingenti sono*
*laxantur adyto fata et immugit specus*
*vocem deo solvente.* [...] (*Thy.*, 650-656; 665-667, 678-682)

As R. J. Tarrant observes, this description of the grove is very similar to that in *Oedipus*[14].

Est procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger
Dircaea circa vallis inriguae loca.
Cupressus altis exerens silvis caput
virente semper alligat trunco nemus,
curvosque tendit quercus et putres situ
annosa ramos; huius abrupit latus

[14] R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca's "Thyestes"*, Atlanta 1985, p. 184.

edax vetustas; illa, iam fessa cadens
radice, fulta pendet aliena trabe.

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*amara bacas laurus et tiliae leves*
*et Paphia myrtus et per immensum mare*
*motura remos alnus et Phoebo obvia*
*enode Zephyris pinus opponens latus.*
*Medio stat ingens arbor atque umbra gravi*
*silvas minores urguet et magno ambitu*
*diffusa ramos una defendit nemus.*
*Tristis sub illa, lucis et Phoebi inscius,*
*restagnat umor frigore aeterno rigens;*
*limosa pigrum circumit fontem palus.* (*Oed.*, 530-547).

Here Seneca combines the depiction of a typically "sublime" scenery[15] with the motif of *locus horridus*[16] (which in accordance with Burke's theory is also a good source of the sublime) and he moves on to a description of the infernal spectres which haunt that place.

In her study, Victoria Tietze Larson defines a "sublime" landscape as one in which *the beauty and grandeur of nature*[17] is noticeable, and a *locus horridus* as a place where *nature is viewed with "religio"*[18], although she also observes that in the works of Seneca the borderline between "sublime" scenery and "horrid" scenery is often rather blurred[19]. The best example of such a place is, I think, the fragment of *Epistulae morales* quoted above.

Modern writers such as Ann Radcliffe have very often used descriptions of landscapes as a means of inspiring fear[20], and this strategy was

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[15] V. Tietze Larson, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 89.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 87.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 89.

[18] *Ibidem*, *passim*.

[19] 'Scenery of this kind appears very frequently in Senecan tragedy and may often overlap with descriptions which I have classified as "loci amoeni" and "loci horridi", *Ibidem*. [strona?]

[20] R. D. Havens, *Ann Radcliffe's Nature Descriptions*, "Modern Language Notes", Vol. 66, 1951, No. 4, p. 253.

also extremely popular in Greek and Roman antiquity. Indeed, it was Seneca who perfected it.

Like the Gothic writers, Seneca uses descriptions of landscapes to create a peculiar *atmosphere of nightmarish terror*, as Charles Segal has termed it[21]. Horrible events in his tragedies always take place in gloomy and phantasmagorical scenery. The best examples of this technique are the ῥῆσις ἀγγελική in *Thyestes* (641-788) and the narrative of the death of Hippolytus in *Phaedra* (1000-1114), to which Segal refers:

> *Est alta ad Argos collibus ruptis via,*
> *vicina tangens spatia suppositi maris;*
> *hic se illa moles acuit atque iras parat.* (*Phae.*, 1057-1059)

This description, as Segal points out, *abruptly introduces the final phase of the disaster*[22] and emotionally prepares the reader for something dreadful which is going to happen very soon. Segal also emphasizes the fantastic character of Senecan description, which is so different from the Euripidean one which contains *objective spatial coordinates*[23].

Seneca, like Radcliffe[24], most probably never saw the places he described in his tragedies. They are all fruits of his imagination and their only purpose is to create an appropriate ambience for the terrible and sometimes macabre events he wishes to depict.

*b. The Rage of Nature*

Another important category of Senecan portrayals of "sublime" nature are descriptions of the weather, particularly those of storms. As Tietze Larson has pointed out, the most significant examples of the use of the storm motif are *Phae.*, 1007 ff. and *Ag.*, 431 ff.[25]. Let us look at the fragment of the second description, where the poet depicts the actions of nature itself:

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[21] Ch. Segal, *Senecan Baroque. The Death of Hippolytus in Seneca, Ovid and Euripides*, "Transactions of the American Philological Association", Vol. 114, 1984, p. 316.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 316.

[23] *Ibidem.*

[24] R. D. Havens, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

[25] V. Tietze Larson, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

*Nox prima caelum sparserat stellis, iacent*
*deserta vento vela. Tum murmur grave,*
*maiora minitans, collibus summis cadit*
*tractuque longo litus ac petrae gemunt;*
*agitata ventis unda venturis tumet:*
*cum subito luna conditur, stellae latent;*
*nec una nox est: densa tenebras obruit*
*caligo et omni luce subducta fretum*
*caelumque miscet.* [...] (*Ag.*, 465-473)

In the quotation above we can see that here Seneca has portrayed nature as an invincible power[26]. Apart from its might[27], it also has several of the other essential features of a sublime object which are listed by Burke:

1. *Tum murmur grave...* – Suddenness (*A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power.*)[28]; Intermittence (*A low, tremulous, intermitting sound* [...] *is productive of the sublime.*)[29]
2. *murmur grave*; *gemunt* – Sound and loudness (*The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and aweful sensation in the mind* [...].)[30]
3. *collibus summis cadit*; *tractuque longo* – Vastness (*Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime.*)[31]
4. *cum subito luna conditur*; *stellae latent*; *nox*; *tenebras*; *caligo*; *omni luce subducta* – Privation (*All* general *privations are great, because they are all terrible;* Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, *and* Silence.)[32]; Darkness (*Darkness is terrible in its own nature.*)[33]

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[26] See M. Wallis, *Wybór pism estetycznych*, red. T. Pękala, Kraków 2004, pp. 39-42.
[27] I. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
[28] E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 124.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 114.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 113.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 173.

Of course, the motif of a storm had been very popular with classical authors long before Seneca's times[34]. Pseudo-Longinus, who of all the ancient criticis is closest in time and in his opinions to Seneca, points out that when Homer himself described storms he chose the most dangerous of all the accompanying circumstances: ὅνπερ οἶμαι καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν χειμώνων τρόπον ὁ ποιητὴς ἐκλαμβάνει τῶν παρακολουζούντων τὰ χαλεπώτατα. (Pseud. Long., 10, 3-4).

Longinus himself considers storms a source of the sublime, which is obvious, for example, when he criticizes Herodotus for the imperfections of his description of a storm: Παρά γοῦν Ἡροδότῳ κατὰ μὲν τὰ λήμματα δαιμονιως ὁ χειμὼν πέφρασται, τινὰ δὲ νὴ Δία περιὲχει τῆς ὕλης ἀδοξότερα [...] (Pseud. Long., 43, 1).

Nevertheless, Seneca, who was conscious of a long literary tradition and who was also strongly influenced by rhetoric, elaborated his own technique of creating the sublime. As we can see in *Phaedra*, in descriptions of nature his tragedies are different from those that we find in the works of his literary predecessors.

In fact, in *Epistulae morales*, *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, *Phaedra* and *Agamemnon* Seneca depicts nature as a great power in the same way that Kant (II b, 101)[35] and Burke[36] do. As we can see in *Ag.*, 465-473, the qualities represented by Seneca's *descriptio loci* correspond exactly to the main features of the sublime listed by Burke. This means that the Senecan concept of the sublime in nature is closer to that of modern authors and critics.

## 2. The Supernatural

Another interesting question is the role of supernatural elements in Senecan tragedy. Of course, various deities and mythological creatures were always present in ancient Greek and Roman literature, but Seneca introduced some new ideas of his own which are relevant to our investigations.

To begin with, let us examine the most important scene of this kind, which is the sacrificial scene in *Oedipus* (303 f.). Manto, the daughter

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[34] See also V. Tietze Larson, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.
[35] I. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
[36] E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

of the seer Tiresias, performs the ritual of divination from the entrails of a bull in order to discover the cause of a plague which has been devastating Thebes.

At the same time, she describes in great detail the proceedings of the sacrifice to her blind father, who interprets the results in accordance with his magical wisdom. Then, suddenly, the dead bull on the altar resurrects in a mysterious manner and threatens the priests with its horns:

> *infecit atras lividus fibras cruor*
> *temptantque turpes mobilem trunci gradum,*
> *et inane surgit corpus ac sacros petit*
> *cornu ministros; viscera effugiunt manum.* (*Oed.*, 377-380)

The intervention of supernatural forces has always been a favourite motif of the so-called Gothic writers. Philosophy offers us a good explanation as to why it has been so popular in imaginative and "sublime" literature. All the strange things for which we cannot find an ordinary explanation are obscure, and obscurity itself is a necessary precondition for the arousal of fear[37].

The case of the resurrected bull is a good example of obscurity. The *dramatis personae* do not know why the dead animal has risen from the altar, yet it is clear that this is a sign of some kind. The fact that the characters know nothing strongly influences the mind of the reader who, although he knows the "future", is able to experience their *horror obscuritatis* by means of empathy and imagination[38].

Let us now go back to the narrative of the death of Hippolytus in *Phaedra* (1000-1114), as it is another place where Seneca has used obscurity as a means of invoking terror. At the beginning of the story there is a description of a strange storm at sea, with no wind and a serene sky:

> *Cum subito vastum tonuit ex alto mare*
> *crevitque in astra. nullus inspirat salo*
> *ventus, quieti nulla pars caeli strepit*
> *placidumque pelagus propria tempestas agit.*
> (*Phae.*, 1007-1010)

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[37] E. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[38] This is how he can experience the "feeling similar to terror" at a safe distance.

It has already been pointed out by Segal that *Seneca's narrative of the death of Hippolytus emphasizes the monstrous aspect of the event. It shifts from a more or less realistic human setting to a fantastic realm of changing shapes*[39]. Until the serpent emerges, the behaviour of the sea is rather extraordinary and bears the marks of a bad omen.

It is therefore quite possible, in my opinion, that Seneca has built up this description gradually, i. e. progressing from the symptoms which indicate that "something wrong is going to happen" towards a terrible revelation at the very end. This would mean that the narrative gradually shifts from the obscure to the shocking.

Let us therefore examine the structure of the messenger's speech:

1. The beginning is quite natural:
a. Hippolytus is banished from Athens (*Ut profugus urbem liquit*, v.1000).
b. He leaves the city in a chariot (*celerem...cursum explicans*, v. 1001).
2. Strange things begin to happen:
a. Suddenly the signs of an imminent storm appear, although the sky is clear and there is no wind (*cum subito...*, v. 1007; *nullus... / ventus*, v. 1008-1009; *nulla pars caeli strepit*, v. 1009).
b. There seems to be a creature which moves the waves (*nescioquid onerato sinu / gravis unda portat*, v. 1019-1020).
3. The monster slowly reveals itself:
a. It is now clear that there is a monster underneath (*qualis...vehitur... / fluctum refundens ore physeter capax*, v. 1029-1030).
b. The monster finally emerges from the sea (*Quis habitus ille corporis vasti fuit!*, v. 1035).
4. Hippolytus tries to offer resistance to the monster:
a. The monster terrifies all earthly creatures (*Tremuere terrae, fugit attonitum pecus*, v. 1050).
b. Only Hippolytus is not afraid (*solus immunis metu / Hippolytus*, v. 1054-1055).
c. He hopes to defeat the monster (*nam mihi paternus vincere est tauros labor*, v. 1067).
5. Hippolytus dies:
a. The hero loses control over his terrified horses (*inobsequentes protinus frenis equi / rapuere cursum*, v. 1088-1089).
b. Hippolytus falls off the chariot (*praeceps in ora fusus*, v. 1085).

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[39] Ch. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

c. Now the messenger describes the terrible death of Hippolytus in great detail (vv. 1093 ff.).

As we can see, the story consists of two parts which are separated by the climax – the appearance of the sea serpent. Until that moment, the narration is rather obscure and difficult to understand. The technique used by Seneca in this passage is very similar to that used by him in the previous passage: the narration gradually progresses from total obscurity to a chilling revelation.

In *Oedipus* Seneca prolongs the audience's expectations and it is not until vv. 626 ff., when the ghost of Laius reveals the shocking truth to Creo, that the mystery is explained. The only result of the ritual of divination is the equally terrible message that another ritual should be performed – that of necromancy in order to find out who killed Laius:

> [...] *alia temptanda est via:*
> *ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,*
> *emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet.* (*Oed.*, 392-394)

In *Phaedra* the revelation is made sooner, while in *Oedipus* the truth is revealed in two stages: first, we learn that another ritual has to be performed, then we hear the terrible truth directly from the mouth of Laius' ghost.

Here we can speak of Seneca's technique of *suspense and terror*[40], which is seen as a typical element of eighteenth-century prose but which, as we can see, was also used by Seneca. The best example of this is *Oedipus*, which, I would argue, is an example of a masterful use of mystery and obscurity in order to achieve the sublime.

## Conclusion

As we can see, the sublime in Senecan poetry derives from two sources: the first is the invincible might of nature, while the second is the intervention of mysterious, supernatural forces. Of course, most of

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[40] Compare: C. Schmitt, *Techniques of Terror, Technologies of Nationality: Ann Radcliffe's "The Italian"*, "ELH", Vol. 61, 1994, No. 4, p. 863.

the motifs used by Seneca (such as the storm and the motif of divination) are conventional, but their aesthetic purpose is quite new.

The Senecan idea of the sublime is, in my opinion, surprisingly close to that of Kant and especially that of Burke. Seneca even draws on many aesthetic qualities, such as suddenness and obscurity, which are listed by Burke as being the most important sources of the sublime.

It is, of course, impossible to define such a complex aesthetic category, but if pressed to define the sublime in Seneca's tragedies, we would say that it is "a feeling similar to terror, which the reader can experience by means of empathy".

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